

Introduction to the Channel Blind

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Last month we started the dog on the Single T on water. On a small pond, he learned to swim to the Back pile, stop and look at you as he treaded water in response to the Sit Whistle, and take "Over" and "Back" casts. Now it's time to begin channel blinds.

Your dog's foundation for channel blinds should also include simple channel marks, with progressively longer entries, as covered in two articles ago. Now we will explain how to develop and use channel blinds to teach the dog to accept staying in the water, and condition him to the idea of the long swim. We will emphasize trust and teamwork, and balance the dog with water re-entries.

Accepting Staying in the Water

In water work, our goal in early training is to create an acceptance of staying in the water. This attitude of acceptance makes the later training on more advanced water blinds come easily, and minimizes the corrections needed in the dog's future training.

Note that "acceptance" of staying in the water, and "refusal to get out of the water" are two different things. We find that if you train the former first, and do it thoroughly, you won't need those "big corrections" that create the second situation — the untrusting dog that won't get out of the water in response to any cast. The ultimate goal is teamwork.

The Channel Picture

The channel picture is an excellent way to begin a dog's training on "water acceptance." To a dog, that swim down the center of a channel is the ultimate in "illogical." After all, with very little deviation he can be comfortable running down the bank on either side of the channel, or at least in lunging water, and get to the bird much faster. To counteract this natural tendency we use the channel swim, done as a blind, to condition the dog to accept the idea of taking a long swim.



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Begin by placing a bumper at the end of a short channel, ideally a channel that he has previously done as a mark. For the first channel blind, the bumper should be visible to the dog. Note: the "right" length of swim varies according to your dog's natural momentum. As a reference point, at the Training Center our young dogs' first channel blind is usually about 30 yards long.

Correcting on the Channel Blind

When the dog goes off line, and heads for the side, there are two ways to approach things. You could handle early, and often, to keep him in the channel all the way along ("obedience to the line"). Or you could give him ONE cast, then allow him make the mistake of getting out, where you correct him.

We recommend the second approach with the beginning dog. With this method, the comparison is clear and easy for him to make. This way, he discovers that the shore is less comfortable than he thought, and he can "make up his mind on his own."

The goal, of course, is to have a dog that can be handled to stay on line. But if you try to make the beginner stay in the center of the channel by handling frequently, the picture he'll get from your many casts is, "I'm always getting in trouble in the water." This is not a good way to start water blind training.

Therefore, allow him to swim toward the side of the channel until he is about six feet from shore. Then stop him with a whistle and cast him "Over," away from the shore. He will probably scallop back to get out. As soon as his feet hit dirt, blow your whistle as you give him an e-collar correction. Cast him into the water. If he refuses that cast, and stays on land, stop him again with your whistle (no e-collar, unless he refuses to stop). Now move up very close to him, and handle him into the water. After he picks up the bumper, make sure he returns to you through the channel, and does not run around on the bank.



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Move Up to Handle at First

Important, move up close to handle him if he refuses your cast into water. He isn't a "handling dog" yet, and there is nothing to be gained by keeping your distance and letting him get into trouble with cast refusal after cast refusal. You "made your point" with that first, well-timed correction that coincided with his original decision to seek land after being handled away from it. As you do more channel blinds in subsequent sessions, you can expect him to be able to take your casts from greater distances.

What To Do If He "Yo-Yo's"

Occasionally, a dog will take your first "Over" away from shore, and try to head straight for the opposite shore. This isn't desirable. Although it reflects his willingness to take your "Over" cast, it also reflects his desire to begin "yo-yo'ing" between the



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two attractive shorelines, instead of driving "Back" to the end of the channel. Basically, the dog is telling you that the attraction of land is more important to him than your control.

If your dog begins yo'yo'ing, do NOT apply the e-collar on both sides of the channel. This "natural reaction" by the trainer can just create new problems for the beginning dog. Instead, stop him in the center of the channel and cast him "Back." If you have to, you can move along the side of the channel to handle him all the way to the bumper. Be sure to make his next channel blind easier so that he can be successful without yo-yo'ing.

When to Increase the Challenge

If your dog has strong natural momentum and a good training foundation, it is quite possible that he will not even think about getting out of the water on his first, short, channel blind. This is fine — just set up his next channel blind to be quite a bit longer than his first one, and he will probably try to get out. As discussed below, he must try to get out to learn the lessons he needs at this stage of his training.

If, however, you DID need to correct on the first short blind, set up his next blind on a different channel of equal difficulty (or run the same channel again from the opposite direction). But if he lost momentum and started yo-yo'ing between the sides of the channel, his next blind should be easier.

The Value of "Failure"— Three Lessons In One

By allowing the dog to give you a cast refusal near land, thus getting out of the water and experiencing discomfort, you are accomplishing several desirable training goals. First, you are teaching your dog about the consequences of ignoring your direction.

Second, you are "reversing nature," and helping him learn to accept staying in the water. To any untrained dog, the land route is always preferable over water whenever he perceives a choice between them. Until the dog has been trained to accept the channel as the "safe route," he will naturally view the long swim as adversity.

You need to make the water route seem more desirable in comparison to the land route. This is why we don't correct a beginning dog **IN THE CHANNEL** with the e-collar, even if he gives us cast refusals. Such corrections will block the channel safety picture. (This is, of course, a temporary state of affairs. When the dog has learned not to cut out of the channel, he is ready for you to refine his obedience to the line.)

In subsequent sessions, find different channel pictures and run short cold blinds. When the dog isn't having difficulty with them, we like to introduce a diversion mark on the side of the channel. He picks up the mark, then swims the channel blind. This, then, is the third lesson of the channel blind — don't return to old falls.

When he is not having any trouble with this concept repeated in various locations, you can introduce other simple cold water blinds where you will handle away from the attraction of land.

Use such configurations as handling past points, through slots (which are a "modified channel picture") and parallel to shorelines (which are "one side of a channel").

Beginning re-entries

Finally, introduce "re-entries" (blinds which require the dog to get out on land and then back into the water). These should be very close to the start of the blind in the beginning. Before we introduce handling over any distant pieces of land, we like to see our young dogs confident at water blinds of about 150 yards. These blinds should require handling away from inviting pieces of land, and the dog should be doing so willingly.

You should introduce crossing land in the beginning portion of the water blind, because this is where the handler's control and influence are at their greatest. When you introduce the idea of a re-entry (crossing land and getting back in the water) it can be particularly helpful to set a "delayed channel blind". A delayed channel blind is where the channel picture is present AFTER the dog has crossed a piece of land that is close to the start of the blind. This kind of blind lends itself to being taught in segments, starting with the channel portion, and then adding the "front end" involving the re-entry.

Developing the Positive Water Attitude

At this stage of the retriever's training, we are always watching to see that the dog is willing to be handled smoothly away from the attraction of land, while keeping up his momentum to go Back (not "yo-yo'ing" between land attractions). We want to see him thoroughly comfortable with the "long swim" idea, while still handling willingly. We are looking for his mental, as well as physical, stamina when faced with what he perceives as "a long swim."

Remember, you are always training a young retriever's attitude, as well as developing his specific "skills." So at this early stage of training a dog to handle on water, look for his comfortable acceptance of the long swim, and an attitude of teamwork while handling close to land. Conditioning through gradual build-up of difficulty, rather than severe punishment, are the keys to developing a good water blind dog.

Keeping the Balance

Of course, "balance" is the key to developing the advanced retriever. To keep the dog in balance during this period, we are also incorporating water re-entries into marks run in the same ponds. This procedure ensures that the young dog will not develop a phobia about getting out on land.

If your dog has trouble with the concept of crossing land during his water blinds, you can use the "back trailing" method, described in our book, *Tri-Tronics Retriever Training*, to develop his comfort level with this concept. We'll cover this method in a future article.